

# Patañjali's Kriya Yoga in the Rule of Saint Benedict

Received September 29, 2018

Accepted October 18, 2018

**Key words**

Patañjali, Yoga Sūtras,  
Saint Benedict,  
Rule of Saint Benedict,  
Kriya Yoga

*The Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali and *The Rule of Saint Benedict* are two spiritual classics that have guided countless seekers over millennia in their search for inner peace and joy. Despite the many years and distinct cultures that separated these two sages, there are remarkable similarities in the spiritual practices they encouraged their disciples to adopt. This article highlights the three components of Patañjali's *Kriya yoga*: *Tapas* – accepting pain and discomfort as help for purification, *Svādhyāya* – study and introspection as a means to know our True Self, and *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* – dedicating and surrendering our lives to God, and examines their place in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*.

## 1 Introduction

*The Yoga Sūtras* of Sri Patañjali and Saint Benedict's *Rule* (further quoted as RB) are two timeless classics that continue to inspire and guide the spiritual lives of countless men and women. Both are masterful teachings on how to live with equanimity of mind, free of selfish attachments, and in refined loving service to others. To guide us on our path of Self-discovery, Sri Patañjali offers nearly two hundred *sūtras*, or "threads" of teaching, while Saint Benedict's *Rule* consists of seventy three chapters. Although Sri Patañjali's *Sūtras*, are mostly short aphorisms, and the chapters in Saint Benedict's *Rule* mostly just a paragraph in length, both texts brim with truth and wisdom, and offer the enthusiastic student a lifetime of study, reflection, and spiritual practice.

Whereas the wisdom of Sri Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* is historically placed with India's ancient forest-dwelling sages, Benedict's wisdom, though rooted in the desert tradition of Eastern Christianity, emerged from a Western Christian milieu. But curiously, notwithstanding the years and cultures that separate their authors, traces of Sri Patañjali's teachings are seen as well in the *Rule* of Saint Benedict. A close reading of the *Rule* reveals that Sri "Patanjali's pulse" [1] beats throughout Saint Benedict's *Rule*, and that Kriya Yoga practices – accepting pain as help for purification, study, and surrender to the Supreme Being (*Yoga Sūtras* 2.1) – are seen as especially important by Saint Benedict for the spiritual formation of both monks and lay person alike.

Interestingly, while the teachings of these spiritual masterpieces have survived and grown in popularity for over a millennium, very little is known about their authors. What we know about the life of Saint Benedict comes primarily from Pope St. Gregory the Great (590–604) who authored the first biography of Benedict probably around 593–594 AD (Gardner 1911). Other than this work, we must glean insight into Saint Benedict from examining the *Rule* itself. We can be confident in our efforts, for as Pope St. Gregory said of Saint Benedict: "*If anyone wishes to know his character and life more precisely, he may find in the ordinances of that Rule a complete account of the abbot's practice; for the holy man cannot have taught otherwise than as he lived*" (RB Preface).

While Saint Benedict wrote his *Rule* about 1500 years ago, there is much less certainty about the origins of the *Yoga Sūtras*. Although Sri Patañjali's birth is generally placed in the second century, the person of Patañjali himself (herself?) is questioned by scholars. Was it just one person who put forth these teachings? Or was Patañjali really multiple people,



### About the author

**Bhaktan Mark Graceffo** (1960) is academic librarian at Saint Peters University, the Jesuit University of New Jersey, where he also teaches religion as adjunct lecturer. Bhaktan is a disciple of Sri Guruji Reverend Jaganath Carrera (founder of the Yoga Life Society) and learning the path of bhakti, the yoga of devotion. His email is [mgraceffo@saintpeters.edu](mailto:mgraceffo@saintpeters.edu).

whose accumulated wisdom was passed on over many years, first orally and then eventually in written form?

Regardless of the scant biographical information we have, we are very fortunate to have the spiritual gems these two sages bequeathed us with. Saint Benedict's *Rule* and Sri Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* are part of humanity's shared spiritual heritage, that while rooted in two distinct traditions, Christianity and yoga respectively, belong to no one. Seekers from any spiritual tradition, or none, can avail themselves to the wisdom found in these ancient texts. Both these sacred works offer a time-honored blueprint on how to cultivate a steady mind and the inner peace that follows. They are guides to nurturing a heart that is at all times contributing to the sanctity of life by responding with love and compassion to the people and ordinary events that shape our days. The *Rule* and *Sūtras* teach us how to become wholly capable of meeting the challenges that life presents. They do not promise us an easy life but one that allows for a greater intimacy with the joys and sorrows that every life entails.

## 2 Growth Begins with Paying Attention

Sri Patañjali's *Sūtras* and Saint Benedict's *Rule* begin in a similar fashion. They call upon disciples to pay attention. The profundity of the teachings about to be shared require disciples to put aside all concerns and pay heed to what is being said. Thus we have Sri Patañjali, in the very first sūtra saying, "*Atha Yogānuśāsanam*" or "*Now, the exposition of Yoga*" (*Yoga Sūtras* 1.1). Sri Patañjali is beginning to teach. He's telling us to take note, to stop worrying about the past or future, to be present to the moment, because he knows how to liberate us from ignorance and suffering, and lead us back to the inner peace that is our True Nature.

Saint Benedict also knew how critical attentive listening is to the spiritual life, so in the Prologue to his *Rule*, he says very clearly – "*Listen carefully my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart*" (RB Prologue 1). Like Sri Patañjali, Saint Benedict wants to ensure that his disciples know that it is time to become single minded, to concentrate on the task at hand, to *listen*. He goes on to say: "*This message of mine is for you, then, if you are willing to give up your own will once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord*" (RB Prologue 3). With these words Saint Benedict is echoing Sri Patañjali's teaching of *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* – the voluntary surrender of one's will and the fruit of one's actions to God – the third element of Kriya Yoga. If we are to

know anything of God these two Masters tell us, we must surrender. So at the very beginning of his *Rule*, Saint Benedict drops a hint to his disciples of what is to come, what they can expect if they choose to place their spiritual lives under his guidance. To be true followers of Christ they will have to surrender their wills, Saint Benedict declares, their devotion to God must be a priority, one in which they wholeheartedly and joyfully commit their time, energy, and love to. It is the same for us today. If we are to discover the peace that is our True Nature and liberate ourselves from the ignorance that obscures it, we must learn to surrender.

## 3 Kriya Yoga

In Book One or *Pada One* ("pada" – one forth portion) of the *Yoga Sūtras*, Sri Patañjali begins his instruction by defining the practice of yoga and laying out its theoretical foundations. *Nirodha* – a still mind that no longer identifies with the habitual thought patterns that cultivate a false sense of identity – is presented as the goal of yoga. Kriya Yoga contributes to the attainment of *nirodha* by helping us be attentive to our daily experiences, and intentional in our efforts not to identify our True Self with the body, or with the whirlwind thoughts (*vrittis*) of the mind (*Yoga Sūtras* 1.2).

In *Pada Two*, Sri Patañjali delves into *sādhana* (*the means to liberation*), or the spiritual practices necessary to overcome obstacles impeding our liberation from ignorance and thus our suffering. It is here where Sri Patañjali introduces Kriya Yoga (*Yoga Sūtras* 2.1), which contains the essential components of any spiritual path and important practices to build upon to advance on the path of yoga. Sri Patañjali tells us that the three elements of Kriya Yoga: (1) *Tapas* – accepting challenges and even pain (physical and psychological) for the purpose of self-purification, (2) *Svādhyāya* – study for the purpose of refining and elevating the mind, and (3) *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* – surrendering to and dedicating one's life to knowing and serving God, constitute yoga in practice (Carrera 2006).

While Saint Benedict, of course, didn't use the term Kriya Yoga, in nearly every chapter of the *Rule*, his disciples are encouraged to use what are essentially Kriya Yoga practices to progress in the monastic life. The Sanskrit word *tapas* literally means "*to burn or create heat*". It refers to those situations that arise in one form or another on a daily basis that challenge us, and that we usually wish we could avoid. *Tapas* could be in physical form, for example a health challenge of some sort, or psychological in nature, perhaps an uncomfortable conversation that we need to have with someone.

Sri Patañjali teaches that all the *tapas* we face offer us an opportunity for growth, and our accumulated experience of facing these challenges, whether we appear successful in doing so or not, all slowly contribute over time to *nirodha*. In other words, everything that life presents us, no matter how sad, bothersome, irritating, frightening, tedious, or frustrating, can be used as material for our spiritual growth. *Tapas* will have a purifying effect if we receive them with an open mind and accept them as lessons from which to learn.

Although adopted by sixth century monks to organize their life in a monastery, the *Rule* has always been relevant for the common person, and remains remarkably so today. The daily *tapas* that Saint Benedict addresses in his *Rule* are challenges we all face, no matter our station in life. So we can turn to the wisdom of the *Rule* when wondering: How do I restrain hurtful speech so that I do not “*sin with my tongue*” (RB 6.1)? How do I “*welcome as Christ*” guests, acquaintances, and strangers (RB 53.1; 66)? How do I serve others without “*grumbling or hardship*” (RB 35.13)? How do I care for the sick and vulnerable in a manner that is “*patiently borne*” (RB 36.5)? How do I respect the rank of those higher or lower than me in my place of employment (RB 63)?

In the *Sūtras*, Sri Patañjali tells us that the value of *tapas* is not only to become stronger people who are able to endure life’s hardships. It is also the refinement of our rougher edges so that we can, over time, become kinder, more compassionate and greater lovers of people and creation. And to accelerate our growth, Sri Patañjali advises that we actually place ourselves voluntarily in situations that will create a little heat in our lives. Thus, we are to look for occasions that will be unpleasant and make us uncomfortable. Visiting someone in the hospital, for example, may be a practice of *tapas* for someone who is afraid of ill health, or aging, or death. Or volunteering to head a committee, can be a *tapas* practice, if we’re inclined to doubt our competency and leadership abilities. *Tapas*, whether we encounter them voluntarily or involuntarily, give us an experience of the wisdom and peace of our True Self, and thus the realization that we possess all we need to face the capriciousness of life.

Saint Benedict also knew that whether our challenges are physical, emotional, existential, or petty, they contain valuable lessons, and offer an opportunity to overcome that which limits living from our full spiritual potential. So the *Rule* as a whole is designed to make us “burn”, to groom us by providing teachings on how to accept and approach the challenges of daily living. Knowing that the hidden fruit of *tapas* is self-transformation, Saint Benedict extends guidance on how to handle the taxing tribulations that are part of our

daily lives. In fact, he referred to a monastery as “*a school of the Lord’s service*” (RB Prologue 45), a clear reference to his understanding that one enters a monastery, or adopts the *Rule* as a lay person, in order to learn how to use the events of daily life to burn away imperfections and thus image more clearly their Divine Nature.

## 4 Svādhyāya

The second component of Kriya Yoga that Sri Patañjali introduces is *Svādhyāya*, or study for the purpose of elevating the mind. *Svādhyāya*, for Sri Patañjali, can refer to the great scriptures of our religious traditions – the *Bible*, the *Bhagavad Gīta*, the *Koran*, the *Dhammapada* – or the study of anything that reveals to us our true Self. The mind is elevated when it is engaged in study that leads us to contemplate our unity with the Divine. As Saint Benedict asks us, in the Prologue to his *Rule*, to “*listen with the ear of the heart*”, *Svādhyāya* in the *Sūtras*, asks us to study with the heart, and to use our study to understand ourselves and our world better (Satchidananda 2012). *Svādhyāya* allows us to finely attune to the dynamisms of nature, and assists us in the self-reflection that is necessary if we are to understand how a practice of *tapas* ultimately serves our Self-realization.

Saint Benedict’s directive on study can be found in Chapter 48 of his *Rule*, titled *The Daily Manual Labor*, where he speaks of the importance both of manual labor and prayerful reading, two cornerstones of Benedictine monasticism. This reading, known as *Lectio Divina*, is a slow meditative reading of scripture, and has over the years become a common form of prayer for the laity as well as monastics. Study and reading were so important to Saint Benedict that he made it part of the daily routine of the monastery, allotting time for it between the hours of prescribed prayer, and increasing this time during the season of Lent. And just in case his monks didn’t fully understand the importance he placed on *Svādhyāya*, Saint Benedict would actually have senior monks walk around the monastery to ensure the younger fellows were studying and not “*wasting time or engaged in idle talk*” (RB 48.18)!

But for Sri Patañjali *Svādhyāya* isn’t just for the sake of study or to accumulate knowledge, theories, or facts. Its primary purpose is to allow our spiritual reading to feed our imaginations and to inspire our *sādhanā*. Ultimately, Sri Patañjali tells us, the purpose of *Svādhyāya* is to *become* what we read, to reach the heights of the saints and masters, and to elevate ourselves so we become one with the One we seek. Saint Benedict would concur.

## 5 Īśvarapraṇidhāna

Finally, the last component of Kriya Yoga is, *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*, the surrender of our personal desires to those yearnings springing from the heart of humanity, which is the heart of God incarnate. To fully dedicate one's life to the wellbeing of others, requires a realization that all is gift, given to us not for our benefit alone but to share in a manner that will move all of creation forward. A life fully dedicated to the common good requires us to surrender to the will of God, and to align ourselves wholly with the Divine creativity that permeates and animates the entire creation.

A key element in an act of surrender is humility, the laying aside of one's ego so that we can serve others selflessly. Saint Benedict placed such importance on humility that the topic is by far the longest chapter in the *Rule* (RB 7). As an aid to his monks in their practice of cultivating humility, Saint Benedict turned to the Psalms, and admonished his monks to “*always keep the fear (presence) of God before your eyes*” (Ps 36:2). We remain humble, teaches Saint Benedict, by resting our attention always on the omnibenevolence of God. And as we ascend the steps of humility he lays out in the *Rule* we will “*quickly arrive at that perfect love of God*” (RB 7.67; 1 John 4:18).

It is important to note that when Sri Patañjali and Saint Benedict speak of self-surrender as central to the spiritual life, they are not only referring to the putting aside of our personal interests. The ability to surrender requires embracing a practice of obedience, and the concurrent habit of reflection and interiority that is fundamental to allowing oneself to defer to the will of a higher authority – abbot, guru, God, humanity, universal love, etc. Recognizing the human propen-

sity to resist deferring to someone else's will, Saint Benedict cautions us that our obedience should be “*free from grumbling*” and not “*sluggish or half-hearted*” (RB 5.14–15), thereby burning away the impurities Sri Patañjali speaks of. This is a key point in the practice of Kriya Yoga because for Sri Patañjali, *Tapas*, *Svādhyāya*, and *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*, weren't to be cast in a negative light, as if they are a grim burden for us to carry. No, the practices of Kriya Yoga are to be welcomed, for through them we are able to begin burning away the inner obstacles that prevent us from unlocking our fullest potential. By removing these obstacles we begin to discover the joy that arises when our actions are purposeful, meaningful, and intimately immersed in the lives of others. At the conclusion of his chapter on obedience, perhaps to lighten things up a bit, Saint Benedict reaches into Corinthians (2 Cor 9:7) and adroitly writes into his *Rule* that “*obedience must be given gladly, for God loves a cheerful giver*” (RB 5:16).

For a monk (or anyone else) following Benedict's *Rule*, nearly each of its 73 chapters can be seen as *sādhana*. For Saint Benedict, a monk's life is to be devoted to prayer and work – *ora et labora*. Prayer and work is what monastic life revolves around, and imbedded in these activities is the potential to draw closer and closer to God. Thus chapters of the *Rule* provide instruction on how to pray the Divine Office (chap. 8), how to maintain reverence in prayer (chap. 20), how to engage in manual labor (chap. 48), how to be a kitchen server (chap. 35), and how to receive guests (chap. 53). For someone trying to live the *Rule*, *sādhana* is weaved into the rhythm of his or her day. The *Rule* is their *sādhana*, their *sādhana* is the *Rule*.

## 6 The Middle Way is the Sattvic Way

Saint Benedict's way is the middle way, a path where he sets down for his disciples “*nothing harsh, nothing burdensome*” (RB Prologue 46). Because he understands just how challenging the *Rule* can be, Saint Benedict is mindful always of the disciple who may need some extra encouragement, who is perhaps a bit slovenly, or occasionally remiss in meeting their obligations. So to those who require a little more consideration, Saint Benedict softens and declares, “*Yet, all things are to be done with moderation on account of the fainthearted*” (RB 48.9). His approach in the *Rule* is, like Patañjali's in the *Sūtras*, *sattvic* – balanced, pure, always aiming to nurture and bring out the best in his followers. The *sattvic* way of Saint

Benedict and Sri Patañjali takes notice of people's strengths not their weaknesses and starts from there. So in his chapter to abbots Saint Benedict offers them this advice on caring for their flock: “*the abbot must accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character and intelligence*” (RB 2.32). The *sattvic* spirit that Benedict expects from all his monks is nurtured by an abbot's dedicated practice of Kriya Yoga. A practice that becomes fruitful when it is enthusiastically attended to without interruption over a long period of time (*Yoga Sūtras* 1.14).

As we are purified by the practices of Kriya Yoga, we are able to live life with greater depth, from a place of peace and

generosity. Both Sri Patañjali and Saint Benedict begin from the premise that our daily lives, no matter who or where we are, provide us with all we need to grow into a greater awareness of our True Nature, our Divine Nature. They remind us that our daily routines afford us innumerable opportunities to burn away our impurities and grow in sanctity. As we advance in the daily practice of Kriya Yoga our Ego begins to slowly diminish in size and weakens in its influence over our thoughts and behavior. And as our ego becomes less dominant we become more sattvic, and thus more prepared and better equipped to approach the “eight limbs” of yoga (*ashtanga yoga*) – the mix of ethical precepts, personal observances, physical practices and meditative techniques, designed to further clear the mind of impurities, and to reveal the wisdom that resides in each of us.

The sattvic way of Sri Patañjali and Saint Benedict offers us a time-honored guide on how to live skillfully and fully, both capable of meeting life’s challenges and effusively grateful for the opportunity to do so. Their deepest desire was for us to know that the God we seek dwells within us. The beauty and genius of their instruction is that it is accessible to anyone – ordinary people living ordinary lives – whose spiritual calling sets them on a path of self-transcendence. The practices of Kriya Yoga are indispensable steps on this path, serving to bolster us, as we move deeper into the cave of the heart sowing the seeds of self-transformation.

## Note

- [1] “Patanjali’s Pulse” is a phrase coined by Rev. Jaganath Carrera, founder of the Yoga Life Society, and the title of a course he taught in 2016 at the Yoga Life Center, NJ.

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